

St Francis' Day: The Gift and Task of Creation

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia, 2 October 2022

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Proverbs 8: 22-31; Psalm 148; Colossians 1: 15-20; John 6: 41-51.

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Four years ago, after an academic conference in Denver, Colorado, Lisa and I went up into the Rocky Mountains. We took an old steam train—one that you'll have actually seen in Western movies, where it's often featured—for a day trip from Durango to Silverton and back in an open carriage. Up and up we climbed, criss-crossing the Animas River, which tumbled downhill through pristine wooded country, and mountain meadows with wildflowers, as the twisting track revealed both mighty mountain vistas and picture-perfect little valleys. It was the most intense and sustained experience of natural beauty I've ever had in my life, and my heart sang.

I'd been chatting with a local woman who often caught this train because she too couldn't get enough of the landscape and the river. Then we turned a corner and came across a blighted scene caused by silver mining, with polluted water, river rocks stained with chemicals, and all the other familiar signs of human neglect and disrespect. I said something to the woman about how shocking this was, yet how universal—how we love the beauties of nature and yet we're not able to stop destroying it. Yes, she replied, and it was all the fault of President Obama and the EPA, the Environmental Protection Agency! She told me that they'd done all this damage; it wasn't industry or mining. This woman turned out to be a full-on conspiracy theorist.

I took the opportunity to ask about her other beliefs and was reminded that however much people love the natural world they love their ideologies more. Her God made the world for humans to use and dominate, according to a particular reading of Genesis, with no environmental risks admitted. Science is good for driving improvements in technology but it's not allowed to tell us anything that our ideology finds challenging—like the need for our theology of creation to embrace evolutionary biology, which plants us humans squarely in the midst of the world as its product, not above the world as its anointed master, and which makes us all equal to boot. Likewise, while science is good for making technology, it can't be allowed to question our established cultural priorities in the form of responsible climate science.

But these cultural priorities are actually quite modern and related to the rise of science. A world of objects bumping together, theorised by Isaac Newton's laws of physics, went with a view of humanity as individuals bumping together in rivalry. These individuals then made a social contract and laws only to preserve their freedom. This was essentially the world view of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and other founders of modern Western political thought, whose legacy remains strong in today's neoliberalism, where the only sacred voice supposed to deserve a hearing is that of the free market.

But, friends, things are different in the Bible. In our Proverbs reading today, divine wisdom wraps up God's creation for us as a precious gift. Yet our dominant attitude today has no understanding of gift or grace, but only competition and getting as much as we can however we can. In truth, friends, we might still think that God made the world, but we don't understand or appreciate creation. As a civilization we don't feel part of the world, at home in the world, and truly responsible for the world. I think it was the radical environmental thinker Rupert Sheldrake who wryly observed that the captains of industry spend their working week destroying the environment so they can afford a weekender somewhere beautiful, at the beach or in the mountains.

Creation in the Bible is about being at home in the world, about knowing it as the place where our God—the God of Israel, the God of Jesus Christ—seeks to bless and delight God's people. Everyone in the ancient world knew that the gods made the world—there was no notion of a

closed natural world run by unvarying scientific laws back then. But what there was involved a lot of pagan attitudes, a lot of cosmic violence, a lot of struggling deities, as in the Babylonian mythology that Israel knew all too well. Israel's enemies the Babylonians pictured their high God slaying his monstrous feminine rival to make the world out of her split corpse. But Genesis starts with a peaceful process, with everything finding its place in God's order, in which all the sacred pagan powers are defanged and rendered benign as God's creatures. Genesis 1 recalls our Psalm today, where the primal sea-monster of Babylonian imagination is turned into a creature made for the praise of Israel's God—Godzilla is turned into Flipper!

Friends, such violent struggle isn't the underlying order of things—it's not what God wants for us. This was true in the sixth century before Christ in Israel's Babylonian exile; it remained true in the sixteenth century, despite Thomas Hobbes the nonbeliever declaring human life to be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short"; and it's still true today, despite America's Republican Party doing everything it can to whip up hatred and set the planet on fire, helped if we're unlucky by that dead-eyed menace in the Kremlin.

Friends, the biblical alternative, as in this morning's Proverbs' story of God's wisdom present in creation, is most clear for us in our epistle reading. The Letter to the Colossians presents what's become known as a cosmic Christology, with Jesus seen as far more than a moral teacher and far more than a saviour from sin. Here he becomes the key to all creation, along with our best hope for its future. "Rejoice O earth" indeed—"Rejoice O earth in glory, revealing the splendour of your creation", as the deacon or priest chants in the Exsultet at our Easter Vigil in the darkened Church. Here the Church sings an Easter hymn to the earth, declaring God's irrevocable investment in the earth. This is the message of our Gospel today, too, as Jesus closes any gap between heaven and earth with his own gift of himself, given as the bread of heaven for a threatened earth, just as for the famished human soul. And of course John's Jesus is evoking the Eucharist, offering healing for a humanity alienated from God, and alienated from the earth.

As for St Francis, whose company we delight in today here in the Eucharist, he not only loved the earth and its creatures, but he loved human beings as part of that creation, and all because of Jesus Christ. For St Francis, Jesus Christ dwelt in the heart of creation and he was revealed in every creature. This we see in Francis' beloved Canticle of the Creatures, which surely puts us in mind of our Proverbs reading and our Psalm today. As the Episcopal theologian Ephraim Radner explains, Francis' Canticle of the Creatures sees Christ himself, and I quote, "clothed in the flesh of beasts and birds and fishes and their habitats, ... designed to envelop the reader within the fabric of godly providence, working variously within the world, but drawing its diverse skeins into a single cloth." For Ephraim Radner this shows us, and again I quote, "the kind of universe the saint inhabited, one strung together with an inter-signification drawn into the cosmic knot of Jesus' life and glory, and explained in terms of the vast store of memorized scriptural forms."¹

Friends, unless humanity's imagination can expand enough to embrace gift and grace, to see beyond rivalrous acquisition and self-interest to a shared future, and fast, we'll do irreparable harm to our earth and to ourselves. We mustn't leave the future of creation for those who effectively just resent it, or, if they claim to love it, they love their poisonous ideologies more. The doctrine of creation can help us, grounded as it most truly is in Christ and dressed in the joyful colours of Easter. Colossians today mentions the Church in the same breath as it proclaims its cosmic Christology. There's a profound link between the good news that we declare and celebrate here in the Eucharist, and the active caring that God demands of all who delight in creation, as I know so many of us do.

The Lord be with you ...

¹ Ephraim Radner, "Creative Omnipotence and the Figures of Scripture", 142. In *Time and the Word: Figural Reading of the Christian Scriptures*, 111-62. Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2016.